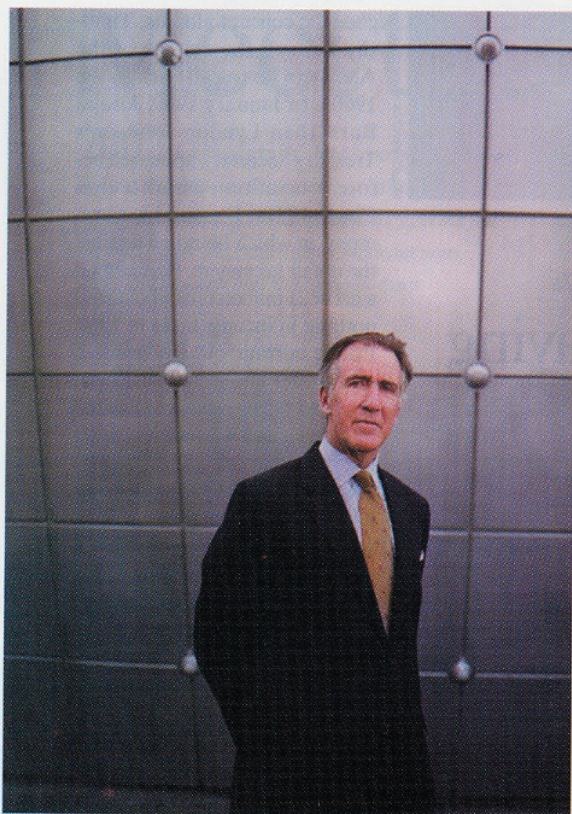


The Lonely Crusade

A Congressman's fight against the AMT.

Eight years ago, Congressman Richard Neal (D-Massachusetts) was walking down Main Street in his hometown of Springfield when an accountant changed his life. Rick Moriarty, a local CPA, pulled Neal aside to complain about a terrible injustice called the alternative minimum tax that was forcing middle-class families all over town to pay extra taxes to Uncle Sam. Only rich people were supposed to pay the AMT, but salesmen

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Representative Neal wants nothing more than to kill the AMT.

and computer engineers were getting caught too.

Neal began to receive angry letters on the subject from other AMT victims as well, none of them wealthy. Then, when he heard that workers at a nearby software company, EMC Corp., were kicked into the AMT because of stock options, he knew he had to act. "It just wasn't fair," he says. He made the cause his own and was transformed from being just another Democrat on the House's tax-writing committee into Congress's No. 1 enemy of the AMT.

It's been a long and frustrating crusade. Neal has repeatedly proposed legislation to nix the AMT and has sent a blizzard of "Dear Colleague" letters to educate fellow lawmakers about its growing hazard. He's written op-eds, hosted countless press conferences, ordered up government studies, and sat for interviews on every major TV network. To the irritation of his fellow legislators, he never lets a congressional hearing pass without grilling an administration official about the tax. On average, he says, he makes his case against the AMT in print, on-air, or in person at least six times every month, including at his own fundraisers. "I don't tire of the topic," he asserts. "From the Boston tea party to now, tax fairness is firmly parked in the American psyche."

He's even hounded the President. At the White House a couple of years ago, Neal asked President Bush, "Why don't we have a smaller tax cut and fix the AMT?" Bush said he wanted his own tax cut but knew that the AMT was a problem worth studying. Nothing came of it. This year Neal tried to substitute AMT reform for Bush's entire tax-cut plan, only to fail in committee.

Neal thinks his colleagues finally understand that an AMT crisis is looming, yet they're still unwilling to repair it. "In my 30 years in elective office I've never had more people say nicer things about my comments and then reject my solution," he says. The main sticking point is the pricetag: Dismantling the AMT would cost about \$1 trillion. Besides, Congress moves only when it absolutely has to, and the AMT hasn't provoked a national outcry. To most Americans the AMT is an academic concern. "It doesn't work as a town hall meeting issue, like Medicare," Neal laments. Not yet, anyway. —Jeffrey H. Birnbaum

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